DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 200 330 PS 012 094

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TITLE Five Views of the Child in Educational Decision-Making.
SPONS AGENCY California Univ., Los Angeles.
PUB DATE 80
NOTE 12p.; Sponsored through the Bush Foundation Program in Child Development and Social Policy.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Children; *Classification; *Decision Making; *Educational Planning; Elementary Secondary Education; *Program Development
IDENTIFIERS *Conceptual Models

ABSTRACT

Five different views of the child can be discerned in educational literature. These views reflect five roles that the child can be seen as taking in the classroom: community member, information processor, person, recipient and object. Anyone who considers an educational program in light of these five views will probably find that the program incorporates more than one. At some point in the development of an educational program, the child might be considered in terms of each of these views. Thus, the five views can be used as a screen to evaluate program statements in terms of how the child is viewed, or as a research tool in analyzing categories of program statements. Currently the five views are being used in considering state guidelines for teacher preparation. (Author/RH)

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# FIVE VIEWS OF THE CHILD IN EDUCATIONAL DECISION-MAKING[1]

Stuart Reifel

In the American educational system, many people make decisions about what happens in the classroom. Federal and state legislatures decide what programs to fund and what general standards need to be maintained. The Federal ESEA and state laws on professional licensing are examples of those decisions. School districts, and in some cases state agencies, make decisions about what texts are to be used in classrooms. School personnel decide about time allocation in the school, including time periods for recess and lunch. Teachers make numerous instructional decisions, regarding the sequences of classroom events and who is to have what educational experiences. We can recognize thousands of decisions that are made about education in our society (Goodlad, 1979).

Amid all this decision-making, I sense an interesting, perhaps disturbing orientation. There seems to be a very awkward view of those who should be our primary interest, that is of the children. Legislators and bureaucrats make decisions about programs, seemingly assuming that the children will receive the program and benefit from it. School personnel schedule a recess for primary grade youngsters, assuming that they should be outside at 9:25 a.m., instead of at 9:15 or 9:45. Exactly who is it that is to benefit from these decisions? It it the children? If so, how are we viewing the children? Who do we think the children are?

In this essay, I will present and discuss five different views of the child that have been extracted from educational literature. It is my purpose to help focus our attention onto the child in education. By this I do not

1. Preparation of this paper was supported by The Bush Foundation Program in Child Development and Social Policy, UCLA, Norma D. Feshbach and John I. Goodlad, co-directors. Louise Tyler has provided thoughtful guidance.



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mean only to talk about educational decisions in terms of the child; we refer to children explicitly or implicitly in all our talk of education. (e.g. In legislation for teacher preparation, it is implicit that children will receive the benefits of being exposed to professionally trained teachers.) The question is not whether the child is considered; the question is the manner in which the child is considered. The five views presented here are an attempt to organize our thinking about who the child is in education. In turn, we might begin to improve our decision-making in education by reconsidering exactly who it is we think we are educating.

Before presenting these five possible views of the child in education, it is important that I make clear some of the educational perspective that is guiding my thinking. Two points will be made. First, our decisions about objectives, learning experiences, organization, and evaluation are run through "screens" that we call a psychology of learning and a philosophy of education (Tyler, 1949). If we decide to teach addition of two-digit numbers in second grade, we accept a psychology of learning that sees the child as capable of learning two-digit addition, we assume that we can organize and teach the necessary lessons, and that we can recognize when the child has learned this skill. We also accept that learning two-digit addition is good in some way for second graders. We select educational activities that are consistent with our views of what the child ought to be doing. Tyler (1949) also states that it is what the child does that he learns. I believe in this rationale of curriculum and instruction, because it recognizes the importance of the child as a central interest for decision-making in an educational program.

Second, I believe that children are complex individuals. Every classroom contains a collection of unique human beings who should be recognized as acting, feeling, needing, and potentially productive community members. To

refer to children as learners is acceptable only if we recognize that they are learning more than the subject matter in text books. Children at school learn about adults, peers, group interactions, themselves, and many other things, as well as about two-digit addition and the capitals of the 50 states. My recognition of the complexity of the individuals in the classroom has made me aware that others have differing perspectives on the child, including perspectives that recognize the child only as a cog in the machinery of the school system.

So who and what are the children we work with in education? How can we view children in the educational process? In the following section, I will present five views of the child that have appeared in educational literature. In the final section of this paper, I will discuss some ways of exploring how we actually do view children in educational decision-making, then make some comments about how we might view children in the future.

## Five Views of The Child

Children, as learners in the classroom, can be viewed in any number of ways. We might say that the child is an empty container, waiting to be filled with knowledge by teachers. Alternatively, we might say that the child constucts his own knowledge and meanings; the child is assumed to learn those things that he can master, things that may be independent of instruction. Following are five views of the child. These views reflect various roles that the child can be seen to take in the classroom. By implication, they also include assumptions about learning, assumptions about classroom experiences that contribute to learning, and suggest various objectives that can be addressed in the curriculum. The five views to be discussed are the child as community member, as information processor, as person, as recipient, and as object.[2]

2. My thinking about thes views has been influences by ideas in a number of editions, including, but not limited to, Eisner and Vallance (1974), Joyce and

The Child as Community Member

The child can be seem primarily as a member of a dynamic social community. Communities have political, economic, personal, and other social interrelationships. Schools contribute to the child's position in a community by providing experiences that enhance the child's constructive participation in the community. The writings of Dewey clearly place the child in a school situation that reflects his membership in a democratic community. Other social studies based curricula (e.g. Oliver and Shaver, 1966; Shaftel and Shaftel, 1967) intend to promote constructive community participation. From this perspective, the school provides the child with experiences that enhance both his understanding of his social community and the skills he needs to function in the community.

At times the political implications of this view of the child become more explicit. The view of the child assumes that an educated child will be able to change, especially to improve, his community. Eisner and Vallance (1974) refer to the potential for "social reconstruction" that might result from education programs that view the child as a community member.

The view of the child as community member might address the child's membership in a socio-economic or ethnic community, or it might address more abstract concepts of community membership, such as democracy, due process, and civic responsibility. In any case, the child is viewed as a current or prospective agent in his social community.

The Child as Information Processor

A child can be viewed primarily as a processor of information at school. This view is represented by those who emphasize a learning process (e.g. Ausubel, 1963; Burns and Brooks, 1970) or cognitive process (e.g. Kamii and

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Weil (1972), and Overton and Reese (1973). I direct interested readers to those resources for thoughtful presentations on, respectively, curriculum, teaching, and psychological theory.

DeVries, 1977; Suchman, 1966). Education is seen as either the development of learning processes or as the use of a learning process. The child at school is seen as someone who is taking in new information and changing his behavior in light of that information.

An example of this view is Ausubel's (1963) advanced organizer approach, wherein children increase their intake of information with the assistance of cues that organize information processing. Joyce and Weil (1972) suggest that Piagetian models of education, with their emphasis on how information is processed at various stages in cognitive growth, view the child as a cognitive processor. A common feature in this view can be seen as the emphasis on "process," with little or no attention given to other characteristics of the child or to the actual subject matter being taught during the learning process.

The Child as Person

When we view the child as a person, our concern is with issues of individual or personal awareness and growth. The student is seen not only as a learner of information, but as someone with motivations to interact with others, to demonstrate competence, to feel, and to make decisions about life. Any number of features can be included in this view of the child, but a recognition of human characteristics beyond simple learning of information is basic to the view.

We have many examples of the child being viewed as a person in education, such as the so-called humanists (e.g. A. Maslow, C. Rogers) and the transcendentalists (e.g. P. Phoenix). This view is still represented in the literature by efforts to apply Erikson's analytic view of personal development (i.e. "The Eight Stages of Man") to educational practice (Tyler, 1972, 1978).

In recognizing the child as a person, we tend to emphasize, perhaps incorrectly, only feelings, creativity, the arts, and other forms of behavior that have been associated with personal growth. There are, however, many ways of

viewing personal growth that have not yet been articulated and applied to education.

The Child as Recipient

When knowledge is viewed as a body of subject matter that is to be transferred to the student, the child can be viewed as a recipient. There are authors who focus entirely on extant knowledge and on the structure of disciplines (e.g. J. Schwab, 1965). This work can be interpreted as promoting the transmission of bodies of knowledge to students; the student is the recipient of that knowledge.

Eisner (1974) points out that in some curricula, subject matter is arranged so that the structure of the discipline is implicitly emphasized; it is tacitly assumed that the child will absorb the subject matter content presented in the lesson, even if the lessons are planned to provide for the learner as person or as information processor. If the intent of the program, whether explicit or implicit, is to present the child with bodies of knowledge, then the child can be viewed as the intended recipient of that knowledge.

The Child as Object

No one can condone viewing children as objects, as impersonal, interchangeable units in the school system. It runs against the grain of most educators to have such a sterile view of young people. Yet, I suggest that many statements we make about children at school can be traced to just this view. Children are viewed or treated as if they were just so many cogs in the machinery of the system.

Perhaps some of our most extreme technological programs in education can serve as an example of this view of the child. A teacher is given an instructional "script" that includes a list of acceptable responses from the child. If the child responds correctly, he is rewarded; otherwise he is corrected and

the lesson continues. Whatever the child is really thinking or feeling in the situation is irrelevant from the perspective of the script. All that seems to matter is the appropriate response.

Other examples of child as object are not so obvious. Guidelines on class size and optimal teacher child ratios can be seen as viewing the child as an object. When we make statements about the number of "places" in a classroom, we are using language that suggests that children are interchangeable units that fit into those "places." It is not the children that are important; it is the number of spaces that they fill that we come to focus on. We transform our pupils into objects.

These five views of the child are, of course, not entirely exclusive of one another. A view of the child as person should certainly include some recognition of the child as information processor and as community member. These five views have been articulated as separate because there is some unique perspective provided by each of the five views. Some authors in education view the child as more of an information processor; some emphasize a personal view. Each of the five views seems to provide a distinctive perspective on how the child can be considered by educators.

## Conclusion

Anyone who considers his own educational program in light of these five views will probably find that his program recognizes several views of the child. Seldom will we find a program that focuses entirely on cognitive processes or on community membership. At some point in the development of a program, we might be considering the child from each of these five views. And that fact suggests a very important use of these five views: The five views can be used as a screen to evaluate program statements in terms of how we view the child.

Do the statements you make about the child tend to fall into one view of the child, at the expense of other views? In your program, do people make more statements about the child as object than about the child as information processor? Does anyone make a statement about the child as person? Given the statements you make about the child in your program, are you clear about how the child is being considered and treated in your program?

To use these five views of the child as a tool for considering the manner in which children are viewed in a program, it is possible to begin with a list of statements of program goals and procedures. Statements might include: The learner will insert the names of the 50 states on a U.S. map; the child will write an essay on prospective occupations in the neighborhood; or, the teacher will acquire current knowledge on the learning process. These statements could be listed, respectively, as child as recipient, child as community member, and child as processor. (You will note that the three examples given do not address the same level of program; the first two apply to a classroom program while the third applies to requirements for teachers in the program. The five views can be used for evaluation of many different types of educational program statements.)

These five views can be used as a research tool, by providing valid categories for analyzing program statements. Currently, the five views are being used to consider state guidelines for teacher preparation. Many of those program statements view the child as a processor of information or as an object. By having at least two persons place statements into the five view categories, a rate of reliability for the analysis can be computed.

Of course, there is no ideal formula for deciding how to consider a child in a program. The needs of your program may necessitate viewing the child more in one way than another. No matter how the child ends up being considered, there is a benefit to knowing how he is being considered. It reminds us of

who we are working with. It provides an organizer for discussion, to provide a shared perspective on educational decisions. And it can assist us to maintain a balanced view of our students, no matter what our program needs may be.

It seems reasonable that we can understand more about the decisions we make in education if we can be more clear about who it is we are educating. Are we operating educational programs for information processors, for objects, or for people who are learning about the world and themselves? The decisions we make should and do reflect our view of children.

By using these five views of the child as a tool for looking at statements about educational programs, we will have a way of considering the child as we make decisions that will influence the child. We will have a framework for saying who it is that our decisions are planned for -- an information processor, a person, a community member, a recipient, or an object. We will also have a way of adapting our decisions to better suit the children we know we should be serving.

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